

Professionalism

Corrections Officers Academy



Professionalism in Corrections

Developing positive professional conduct is constantly challenging and takes engagement at the highest level of ability: a daily self-evaluation, re-orientation to goals, and the purpose of serving a higher calling to be ethical moral and values-centered. Those engaged in the development of positive professional standards are constantly faced with the examples of peer un-professional conduct. This course will discuss the attributes of professionalism as it relates to the corrections field and the Officer's agency and challenge them to dedicate to maintain the highest level of performance during their career.

Corrections Professionals can all agree to the value of endorsing and maintaining a job performance standard. It is what keeps us all working towards the same goal; it organizes our efforts to do the job. It should also serve as a means to define personal performance. The standards of conduct and the mission of an agency also provide a primary source of guidance to shaping professionalism.

The acquisition of personal professional standards does not come easily. It requires hard work, dedication, and training. The employee who just puts in time to collect a wage, abuses sick leave, or becomes bitter, ignores the path to success based on professional achievement while increasing the risk of damaging their career from consequences of un-professional conduct. Their actions affect others. In a real sense, if they do not perform to proper standards it does not just occur in isolation, their poor decisions affect all the other people they work with. They negatively impact the achievement of the primary goals of any agency: safety, security, and risk management.

If the Officer wants to do the right thing but feels inhibited at their agency due to a culture of misconduct, the personal choices become complicated by loyalty issues: being loyal to those that are not professional versus doing the right thing and risk being isolated by their peers. In a sense, having the choice between joining those in misconduct or risk being ostracized by their peers for making the right choice based on following agency policy and procedures." In that way, it would be easier to become like the company you keep, falling prey to the way of letting standards slip and justification of poor conduct.

The occupation of corrections has become more professional over the years. Once being viewed as just a way to make a living or as a stepping stone to other law enforcement ventures has more recently revealed more and more employees in corrections who are making a career for themselves in the field. Corrections professionals who commit themselves to their chosen occupation enjoy vast benefits and privileges from the respect of fellow employees, inmates and the public to a real feeling of self-respect knowing the limitless contributions you have made in people's lives.

Professional development includes utilizing all training resources available to you. Also, you should keep current with new information, laws, and the policies and procedures of your agency. In addition, you should always maintain ethical and moral behavior on and off the job.

At times maintaining ethical and moral behavior can be challenging and complicated. Peer pressure from co-workers, inmates, and personal issues may influence your daily and long term decisions. "You can only control you!" Ultimately, it is the only truth in dealing with the issue of professionalism. You can influence the un-professional behavior of others but you cannot change it for them. Agency administration is not a source of blame in order to reinforce a sense of victimization; it is a choice to see

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yourself as a victim of your circumstances. Knowing that you have to make ethical decisions daily is both challenging and rewarding.

In order to demonstrate the best professional behavior, you will need to work toward personal and professional achievement to combat complacency and laziness. You do this as a Corrections Professional for the very reason that to do anything less allows for slippage of your high ideals and standards. If your efforts are dedicated to working with others by leading by example, creating teamwork, striving to embody professional characteristics, giving and receiving constructive criticism, and separating personally destructive habits from the work environment, then you have established a method to perform rigorous job requirements and personal satisfaction.

Roadblocks to Professionalism

- Using inmate jargon.
- Ignoring rules of procedures.
- Playing favorites.
- Enforcing rules inconsistently.
- Having difficulty saying "no" to inmates.
- Badmouthing other staff, the system, the administration, etc.
- Dressing sloppily.
- Missing work.
- Arriving late.
- Leaving work for others.
- Gossiping.
- Pilfering food or supplies.
- Failing to respond to inmate requests.
- Chronic complaining.
- "Passing the buck."
- Discussing inappropriate subjects in front of inmates.
- Avoiding contact with inmates.

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Roadblocks are individual officer behavior that affects everyone they work with. The way they act toward inmates, co-workers, or general negative beliefs and attitudes that block the new officer from doing the job the “right way.” These Roadblocks can influence the culture of an agency because, at some point, if enough people do them, they become the accepted standard. In order to overcome them, the new officer must work to change the way things do not work according to policy and procedure. In some cases, you can put effort into speaking up and confronting this type of unprofessional behavior at the time it occurs. Do not assume, however, that you are free of responsibility if you do not speak up about an issue. You cannot hide from standing up for what you believe in. You must purposefully let others know you believe in doing the right thing, to do otherwise means you are going along with something you furthers the culture of wrong-doing.

Definitions

Standard: An accepted measure of comparison for quantitative or qualitative value: criterion.

Code: A systematic collection of rules and regulations of conduct or procedure.

Most agencies have a “Code of Ethics” or “Standard of Conduct” that serve as a guide for officer conduct. Taken together, the definitions, “**An accepted measure of comparison (for quantitative or qualitative value: criterion)**” and “**A systematic collection of regulations and rules of conduct or procedure**” provides a practical approach to comparing what you think you should do to what others expect. In order to make sure you do what is right, you need develop a personal professional standard of conduct. A standard to create for yourself that lets you measure your behavior in any situation where you are not sure of what is expected.

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Corrections Officers Code of Ethics

I pledge to be a good citizen and a credit to my community, state, and nation at all times.

I will abstain from questionable behavior which might bring disrepute to the agency for which I work my family, my community, and my associates.

My lifestyle will be above and beyond reproach and I will constantly strive to set an example of a professional who performs his/her duties according to the laws of our country, state, and community and the policies, procedures, written and verbal orders, and regulations of the agency for which I work.

On the job I promise to:

KEEP the institution secure so as to safeguard my community and the lives of the staff, inmates, and visitors on the premises.

WORK with each individual firmly and fairly without regard to rank, status, or condition.

MAINTAIN a positive demeanor when confronted with stressful situations of scorn, ridicule, danger, and/or chaos.

REPORT either in writing or by word of mouth to the proper authorities those things which should be reported, and keep silent about matters which are to remain confidential according to the laws and rules of the agency and government.

MANAGE and supervise the inmates in an evenhanded and courteous manner.

REFRAIN at all times from becoming personally involved in the lives of the inmates and their families.

TREAT all visitors to the jail with politeness and respect and do my utmost to ensure that they observe the jail regulations.

TAKE advantage of all education and training opportunities designed to assist me to become a more competent officer.

COMMUNICATE with people in or outside of the jail, whether by phone, written word, or word of mouth, in such a way so as not to reflect in a negative manner upon my agency.

CONTRIBUTE to a jail environment which will keep the inmate involved in activities designed to improve his/her attitude and character.

SUPPORT all activities of a professional nature through membership and participation that will continue to elevate the status of those who operate our nation's jails. Do my best through word and deed to present an image to the public at large of a jail professional, committed to progress for an improved and enlightened criminal justice system.

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Professionalism Examples

Example #1: "Our job is not to punish."

There's one officer who thinks he is the only effective officer. He is constantly yelling at the inmates and infracting them at the smallest chance. He lets everyone know if you're not like him, you're soft and ineffective. He's always bad mouthing supervisors for being too soft on the inmates. He feels that all inmates should be doing hard time and be punished constantly for their crimes. This officer fully hates his job and is always stressed out. I feel sorry for him because a person should work a job they like. It makes life so much better.

Example #2: "Officer reputation is everything."

An example of unprofessional behavior of a co-worker is when my FTO and another officer were trying to toss toilet paper through the food trap door in one of the pods. The officer did not believe that his FTO could do it, so the FTO started tossing toilet paper through the trap door. This went on for about five minutes in front of inmates.

Example #3: "Legal liability issues."

During my first week of active duty, I witnessed two examples of unprofessional behavior. First, I observed a custody officer who lacked professionalism in his personal appearance. His shirt was wrinkled and his face unshaven. He also slouched when speaking to inmates. In the second example, I observed staff cutting corners with suicide logs. Our policies and procedures require us to perform a suicide check every fifteen minutes and subsequently record our findings. However, sometimes, due to pressing circumstances this was often left undone for upwards of forty-five minutes. When I asked about the unmarked spaces on the log, I was told to just fill them in if the person was still alive when checked.

Example #4: "The rules don't apply."

A coworker arrives 20 minutes late and not in uniform. I fill him in on the day's events including that the inmates have already had "air time." He then fills me in on any and all the arguments he's had with the supervisor the day before. My shift ends 20 minutes later than it should've and then he lets the inmates out to smoke and run around anywhere they want to inside the jail [which we later see on the video from his shift]. It's all against policy and procedures which he clearly disregards.

Example #5: "Personal baggage."

When I was working on 2nd floor in our facility one of my co-workers came to work with some personal problems. Heightened tension soon boiled over into several arguments with the inmates during the walk through. It was apparent when the tension levels rose among the inmates. Besides devoting a lot of time writing disciplinary reports for the problems she started, the workload increased because we were now one officer short for normal floor activities. The tension level was also high for the other officers because of the additional work.

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Example #6: "Gossip/negativity."

On my first day of work, after all the important paperwork was filled out, I was dropped off in the booking area and told I would be following officer "Z" for the first half of the shift. He showed me around, introduced me to a few officers and then took me to the control room. For the next hour, he degraded the Lt. of Operations and told me how inept he was and much, much more. I didn't even have an hour on the job and already my head was being filled with biased and negative thoughts. To this day, I have issues with "Z" and I think it would be good for him to find a different line of work.

Example #7: "Letting standards slip."

There was one incident that stood out. After completing my Field Training program, I had the chance to work with a seasoned officer who has been employed with the facility for 7 years. The officer did not demonstrate to me the behavior of a professional. His appearance was sloppy, he was unshaven, he needed a haircut, he was extremely overweight and he didn't have the proper equipment on his duty belt. He would also talk to the inmates about his personal life. The inmates would come up to him and ask about his family and he would discuss it with no hesitation. He would also perform some of his pod officer tasks without following policy. In one example, when dispensing medications, he would allow the inmate to hold medications in the palm of their hand. He didn't check to see if they had swallowed the medication or not. The whole shift was the same thing. It felt like the officer did not care about what he was doing.

Example #8: "Entitlement"

I have a co-worker who is a Corporal and has been at the agency for 18 years. For legitimate reasons, he was passed over for promotion to Sergeant. He wasn't very professional about things; he was always gone for personal reasons. That led to other problems with co-workers. Nobody wanted to work with him. He also thought he was always right and would never admit to being wrong. He wasn't willing to do things for other people. Because of this, administration decided to pick a person who was hired about a year earlier. This made the Corporal really mad. His attitude now is "I'm only here to get paid." He will often say, "That's not my job" if he doesn't want to do something or, "I don't have time to do that." People really don't want to work with him now but they all just put up with it.

Example #9: "Undercut as a rookie."

I worked with Officer Jones for a period of time in a living unit. Jones rarely wrote infractions for minor rule violations. I would typically give one verbal warning and write an infraction for a second occurrence. This was consistent with how I had been instructed and the practice I had observed. One of my duties was to inspect inmate rooms. If an area of a room was unsatisfactory on two consecutive days, an infraction was written because the inmate had failed to keep the room in accordance with policy.

Several inmates felt that my room inspections were unfair. Prior to my arrival in the unit, infractions were never written for having excess items on locker tops. Several inmates asked about this. I explained the policy to them and showed them how discrepancies in a given room are indicated on the room inspection sheet. They had a chance to correct the discrepancy. If it was not there on the following day, they would not get written up.

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The inmates did not like my answer and decided to go to Jones to seek relief. Jones was much more conciliatory. He even went to the Sergeant and pleaded their cause. "You've got an inmate who's never in trouble, who's now getting written up," said Jones.

Example #10: "R-E-S-P-E-C-T"

I was new to my job and assigned to recreation. I had never done this before. I had only been in the area once before and watched another officer do the job. When inmates came to my area I radioed to control that I had received the group I was to supervise. I also took the opportunity to confirm the procedure to access the recreation area. I radioed to my supervisor what I was going to do. He yelled back over the radio for everyone to hear, "Just do the damn job!!!"

Summary

Throughout your career you should continue to develop as a professional in your career by: gaining experience, learning from others you respect, pursuing any and all training available, joining a professional corrections association, researching agency policy, procedures and operations and areas of interest in corrections specific subject areas.

We are all faced with decisions, sometimes difficult, on a daily basis and choosing to do the right thing in your professional and personal life will serve you, your family, co-workers, inmates, and the community well. Do the right thing in your capacity as an officer, with the authority granted to you and always remember to use the "firm, fair, and consistent" rule when dealing with inmates. Using discretion and personal ethics are vital tools in striving to achieve a high standard of personal conduct as a corrections officer. There may be obstacles along the way but remember, "You Control You". Always be the professional you know you should be!

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EXERCISE: Considering the Examples

Considering the examples you have just read, answer the following question: Why do you think the officers in the case studies acted so unprofessional?

EXERCISE: Code of Conduct

Read the Corrections Officers Code of Conduct. List five that you personally endorse.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

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EXERCISE: Definitions

Please complete the following definitions.

Code: A _____ collection of _____ and
_____ of conduct or procedure.

Standard: An _____ of comparison for
quantitative or qualitative value.

EXERCISE: Professional Development

List three things you can do to continue to grow as a professional corrections officer during your career.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

EXERCISE: Roadblocks to Professionalism

Identify some roadblocks you have observed at your agency:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Complete the following sentence:

"Every ROADBLOCK effects agency _____."

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EXERCISE: Professional Behavior

List five specific ways you use to keep your personal life from affecting you at work.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

EXERCISE: Emotional Survival

Please answer the following taken from page 81 in "Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement," Kevin M. Gilmartin, Ph.D.: What do Officers Control?

Other forces control major elements of the individual officer's role, they are:

The_____.

The_____ or,_____.

The_____.

The_____.

The_____ of the_____.

The_____, _____, or_____ officials.

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EXERCISE: The PRO'S & CON'S

List the benefits of professional behavior:

List the costs of un-professional behavior:

EXERCISE: Characteristics of a Professional Corrections Officer

Identify the characteristics that you believe define a professional corrections officer.

PHYSICAL:

SOCIAL:

INTELLECTUAL:

EMOTIONAL: